A Child's Story of American Literature

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Chapter XI. Poe, the Man of Many Cities.

HERE, in the story of the life of Edgar Allan Poe, we have one of the saddest, if not the saddest, of all the stories of America's literary men and women. It is the story of a man who died young—that is to say, not perhaps as you young people think of life to-day, but as you will think of it in the future when you have boys and girls of your own—and yet who never seems to have been young; of a man who was always something of a child in his ability to take care of himself, and yet who never seems to have had one sunny month of carefree childhood. Remember that when you come to think of his faults, and he had many.

Often we picture life in connection with the seasons or the months. April, for instance, is youth, and July and August are the middle years, and December is old age. Poe, in one of the most beautiful and famous of his poems, "Ulalume," wrote of October as if he felt that it was to be the month of his doom. He called it "The Lonesome October," when skies were "ashen and sober" and leaves "withering and sere." He never lived to know October in the sense of a period of life. If he had he might have found it all golden with the beauty of many colored leaves that were not "withering and sere," a month full of possibilities of the greatest happiness.

Robert Burns, the Scotch plowman, wrote the often quoted lines:

Oh, wad some power the giftie gie us
To see oursel's as ithers see us!

So in thinking of American literature and its great figures it is worth while occasionally to stop and consider just how they are regarded by the people of other enlightened nations of the world. Suppose that a vote were taken in England and France and Germany and Belgium, not to go any further, as to who was thought to be the greatest of all American writers. There would be a good many votes for Walt Whitman, whose genius as a poet is being recognized more and more by Europeans, and possibly scattering votes for Irving, Cooper, Hawthorne and some of the later men. But in the end there would certainly be found an enormous majority for Edgar Allan Poe, who has spread the fame of American letters over the world probably more than all other American writers combined.

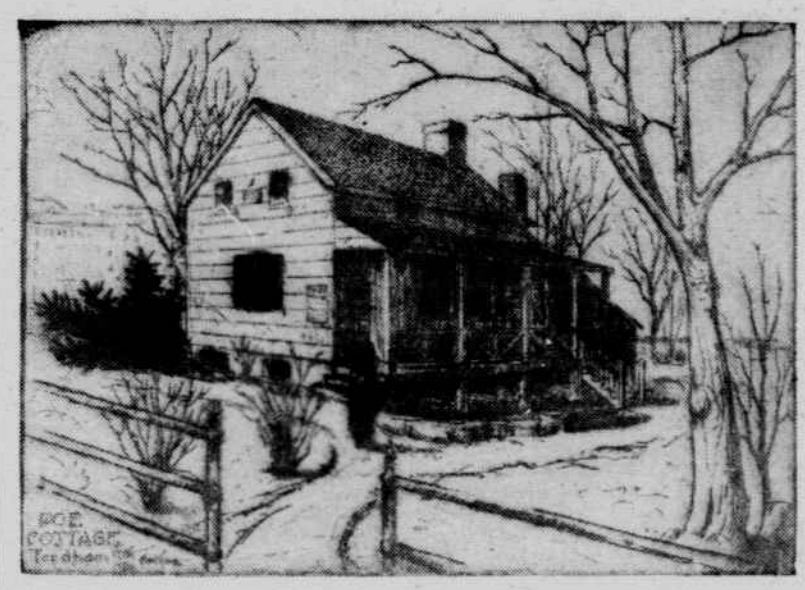
Edgar Allan Poe; the Boy.

Edgar Allan Poe was a man of many cities. He was born in Boston; he spent much of his boyhood in Richmond, Va.; he was sent to school at Stoke-Newington, which is a part of London; he lived in his writing years part of the time in New York and part in Philadelphia; and he met his untimely, tragic and mysterious death in Baltimore. In New York and Philadelphia he had various residences, and it was in the former city that most of his great poems and short stories were written. Unlike most men, he had no affection for his birthplace. His first published book bore the title, "Tamerlane, a Poem. By a Bostonian," but afterwards he came to detest Boston and usually pretended that he had been born somewhere else.

But Boston it was, the date was January 19, 1809, and he was a child of what were known as strolling players, for his mother was an actress, Elizabeth Arnold, whom his father, David Poe, of a very good family of Maryland, had married against the wishes of his people. To be a son of strolling players does not sound so unhappy a fate to you now in days when the stage is an honored profession. But once upon a time actors and actresses were thought to be so different from other people that even after they died their bodies were not allowed in Christian cemeteries. It was not quite so bad as that one hundred and fourteen years ago, but there were still many persons who professed Christian charity in church on Sunday morning and yet who regarded actorfolk as being somehow in league with the devil.

Not only was Poe a man of many cities; he was a child of many cities; for, "born on the road," to use the stage expression, his mother was constantly traveling from theater to theater. Ever since his parents had married they had been traveling: from Boston to New York, to Philadelphia, Washington, and through the cities of the South. Then, in Richmond, when Edgar was three years old, she died—his father was already dead—and the boy was adopted by a Mr. John Allan, a native of Scotland, who had come to America and prospered as a merchant in Richmond. The Allans had no children of their own and wanted to do all they could for the orphan that fate had consigned to their care. Edgar's first schooling was in Richmond, and then, when the Allans went to England for a long stay, he was sent to a school in Stoke-Newington, which was then a suburb of London. There he remained for five years, from the time he was six until he was eleven.

The boy at schoool was father of the man of later life. Shy and proud, he never had the ability to make friends. When his schoolmates threw themselves into games he stood apart, silent and gloomy. It was not entirely his fault, for his nature did not permit him to behave otherwise. But other boys did not understand; they had not yet learned the lesson of tolerance; and naturally they did not like him. That was his fate through life. Men seldom liked him; but many women did.



—From an etching by Bernhardt Wall.

The Poe Cottage at Fordham.

At the "University" and West Point.

In 1820 the Allans returned to America and Richmond, and for some years Edgar attended Dr. Burke's School, preparing for entrance into the University of Virginia, which was then a new institution, planned and founded by Thomas Jefferson. Edgar entered the "university" in February, 1826. He did not stay there long. During his brief stay he distinguished himself in Latin and French. But there is no use trying to hide the fact that he was a wild and foolish boy. Had good, healthy, organized outdoor athletics been a feature of college life in those days his life might have been considerably different. He might have excelled on the cinder path, for he was a wonderfully swift runner, or been an outfielder on the baseball team, or, despite his light weight, shone as a quarterback or end, as others of his name and blood have done in later years. But there were then no baseball or football or track athletics, so Edgar found his diversion in playing cards for money. It was disastrous pastime, and when he left the "university" he left behind him gambling debts to the amount of $2,500, which Mr. Allan had to pay.

Naturally, Mr. Allan was not pleased and declined to consider the idea of Edgar's going back to Charlotteville, even if the college authorities had been willing. He wanted Edgar to go into his store as a clerk. But that was not at all suited to a boy of Edgar's disposition. He was burning with the desire for adventure. Later he imagined that at this time he had gone to Greece, like the English poet Byron, to fight for Greecian independence. In fact, he imagined it so hard that the time came when he tried to make other people believe that he had actually done so. In reality he went to Boston, where he lived in great poverty, but where he persuaded a publisher to print for him in 1827 his first volume, "Tamerlane and Other Poems, by a Bostonian."

Then, on May 26, 1828, he enlisted in the United States Army as a private under the name of Edgar A. Perry, and soon rose to the rank of sergeant-major. He was stationed at Fortress Monroe in 1829, when Mrs. Allan died in Richmond. By the help of Mr. Allan he obtained leave of absence, and there was a kind of reconciliation between the young man and his fosterfather. Mr. Allen obtained for Edgar a cadetship at West Point, and the boy entered the Academy in 1830. There he did not last even as long as he had lasted at the University of Virginia. At the end of six months at the Point he deliberately brought about his own expulsion.

Thenceforth Poe had no kindly supporter upon whom to lean from time to time. Mr. Allan had married again and had a son, and therefore Poe's hope of coming into his money was forever gone. To live he had to turn to his pen, which was a bad thing for him but a very good thing for American literature. His first money came in the form of a prize offered by a Baltimore paper, the *Saturday Visitor*. Poe won $100 with his "The Manuscript Found in a Bottle." But after that money did not come so easily. He drudged along in Baltimore for some years until, in 1835, he obtained a position on the *Southern Literary Messenger* of Richmond, which had just been started and was destined to become one of the most famous periodicals of the old South.

Virginia, the "Child Wife."

It was in September, 1836, that he married the girl who has come down to us in pretty memory as the "child wife." Her name was Virginia Clemm, and at the time of the marriage she was really a child, being thirteen years old. Indeed, she never quite grew up, for at the time of her sad death in the cottage at Fordham she was not yet twenty-seven. If there was one time in his life when Poe had his chance and should have made the most of it, it was in that autumn of 1836. He had an adoring wife, devoted mother-in-law in Mrs. Clemm, and a good position. He worked hard enough—he always did that—but he allowed bad habits to get the better of him. Soon those at the head of the *Southern Literary Messenger* decided that they had enough of him, despite a talent which every one had begun to recognize, and the little family of three left Richmond and went hopping about from town to town and from house to house. It was a hopping about that was to continue for many years.

First, it was New York. There they found a house in Carmine street, in old Greenwich Village, and were as usual desperately poor, Mrs. Clemm being obliged to take in boarders in order to make both ends meet. About a year was spent in the Carmine street house, where Poe wrote his "Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym," and then a move was made to Philadelphia. Very likely the change was made with the idea that Poe would be closer to the big magazines, for in 1840, Philadelphia, and not New York or Boston, was the literary metropolis of the country.

Work was found, first with the *Gentleman's Magazine*, and afterwards with *Graham's Magazine*, the latter being in its day the most famous periodical in the land. In addition to his editorial duties Poe was writing at this time some of his greatest short stories, such as "The Fall of the House of Usher," and "The Murders in the Rue Morgue." A happy windfall came to the little family when "The Gold Bug" won a $100 prize in a competition. "The Gold Bug" was written around a cryptogram, and Poe was a wonder at that sort of puzzle. In *Graham's Magazine* he challenged readers to send him any kind of secret writing that he could not solve, and from the first installment of Charles Dickens's "Barnaby Rudge," he guessed the outline of all the chapters that were to follow. Dickens is reported to have said: "The man must be the very devil."

The Struggle for Life in New York.

After six years in Philadelphia the little family decided to try New York again, and Poe and Virginia went on ahead to find a habitation, leaving Mrs. Clemm behind. There is a letter from Poe to his mother-in-law which tells of the journey and of conditions of life eighty years ago. The travelers left Philadelphia at 7 in the morning, and did not reach New York till 3 in the afternoon. They went in the cars to Amboy, and then took the steamboat the rest of the way. When New York was reached it was raining hard and Poe left his wife in the ladies' cabin of the boat and went off to hunt for a boarding house, which he found in Greenwich street. Near the end of his letter he wrote: "We have now got $4 and a half left. To-morrow I am going to try and borrow $3—so that I may have a fortnight to go upon." Just think of seven dollars and a half being enough to live on for two weeks in New York!

It was on January 29, 1845, that "The Raven" appeared, Poe being paid for it $5 according to some and $10 according to others. But no matter what the price, the date is a memorable one in American literature, for "The Raven" is not only a beautiful poem, but one that no one ever forgets. You may know it now; if not you will soon know it, and the haunting music of its lines, and the raven perched upon the bust of Pallas, and croaking its "Nevermore" will cling to the memory throughout life. You may learn other great and beautiful poems; but "The Raven," once learned is never forgotten. Its publication made Poe immediately famous as a poet. It was recited in every corner of the land. But though the poem was destined to last through the ages, the $5 or $10 earned by writing it was quickly spent.

All of the years of Poe's life were sad years, and perhaps the saddest of all were those passed in the cottage at Fordham, where his child wife, Virginia, died. When you read of his bad habits, and of the outbreaks of temper that made him so many enemies, think also how unhappy he was, and how poor he was. Really his habits could not possibly have been so bad as his enemies pictured them, or he never could have done the tremendous amount of work he did. He was to blame for some of his misfortunes, but not for all. What a sad picture the last days of Virginia present. "There was no clothing on the bed, which was only straw, but a snow white counterpane and sheets. . . . The weather was cold. . . . She lay on the straw bed, wrapped in her husband's greatcoat, with a large tortoise shell cat in her bosom. . . . The coat and the cat were the sufferer's only means of warmth; except as her husband held her hands and her mother her feet." Virginia died. Poe lived on for two years. Pity him!